

The parable of the Wheat and Weeds

We're continuing our series looking at the Kingdom and our role as Kingdom carriers. Tonight we're looking at the Parable of the Weeds, or Wheat and Tares as it is sometimes known

Read passage: Matthew 13: 24–30 & 36–43

The Parable of the Weeds

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

²⁸ "An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

²⁹ "No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them.³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

A parable is an analogy using everyday examples of a deeper truth. Parables therefore focus on one main point – and we have to ensure our understanding is aligned with this. Right at the start of this parable Jesus makes clear that it is about the Kingdom. It is not about individuals, their lives, or salvation directly. However, whilst the parable isn't about these things we can learn something about them, but we cannot use this as the whole picture for these things.

The disciples ask Jesus to explain the parable, which he does. To a degree. He tells us who the characters are in the parable and what the symbols represent. However, the deeper point still isn't explicit.

The Parable of the Weeds Explained

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

³⁷ He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

I think there are two main reasons Jesus doesn't make the meaning fully explicit – both are linked:

1. As Jesus described earlier when asked why he spoke in parables it was so those who were hungry for it could find it – secrets hidden not from us but for us. It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, and the Glory of Kings to search it out.
2. Learning has its best impact when we discover something rather than are told it. Revelation like this impacts not just our knowledge but who we are and what we do with what we know. It is experiential to us not just theoretical.

The parable Jesus shared is one that would have been understood – the situation was not uncommon. In Jesus' day, sowing weeds in a neighbour's field was a common way people had of getting even with each other. Instead of graffiti-ing on the wall of the house or egging the neighbour's chariot, they'd sow

weeds in the neighbour's wheat fields. It had become such a common practice that the Roman government actually passed a law against it.

The other thing to note is that the weeds that were sown were not obvious. This particular seed spoken of in the Parable of the Wheat and Tares is called a "bearded darnel." It was a variety of rye grass and, in the early stages of growth, was indistinguishable from wheat. You couldn't tell them apart. So, you didn't know there was darnel growing in your field until the stalks started to produce, and then it was too late, because the roots would be so interwoven that to pull up the weeds would be to pull up the wheat.

The seeds of the bearded darnel were poisonous. They'd make you sick. The name comes from the French word, Darne, which means, stupefied. The symptoms of eating darnel grain were dizziness, slurred speech, vomiting and diarrhea. It was bad stuff. In big enough doses it could kill someone.

Wheat and bearded darnel were so similar in appearance it was impossible to tell the difference right up until they began to bear fruit. The wheat would begin to produce its seed which would swell and add weight causing the stalks to bend and bow. The bearded darnel has small black seeds, they were light and so the stalk would stand upright and proud. A picture in itself. The wheat would bow before the harvester, the weeds would not.

Some have argued that this parable is about true believers in the church and a battle over what we believe – I don't believe that to be true, it isn't about wrong belief being sown into the body of believers, although that is an issue, and clearly was happening in the early church – whether over the need to add works to grace, or whether the body was somehow evil and only the spirit mattered, or any other twist on the gospel.

Paul is quite clear on rooting these things out – getting rid of those who are sowing these seeds being ruthless with it. The same with those who sinned and when challenged would not repent – which is the opposite approach to what Jesus has talked about here.

The parable is broader than that – it is about the state of the whole world, from beginning to end...

In Creation the seed was sown – with the instruction to be fruitful and multiply. Given the fullness of life. But the enemy came and sowed his own seed – he came to lie, kill and destroy. In mercy, judgement was delayed for a later time to avoid the wheat being destroyed. The picture of the Kingdom is that it is here and now, encompassing the world, but that there is another kingdom at hand. Both grow together – both seeds grow up and it is not until the end that the final separation will happen.

Going a step further the passage starts by saying the Kingdom is like a man – the man sowed field and an enemy came, but the Kingdom is like the man – he is the source of the good seed – the source of truth. He is the one that says to his servants not to try and pull out the tares but leave them because in doing so he protects the wheat. He is seen to be wise and merciful. The Kingdom is therefore a reflection of the one who is King - full of goodness, of wisdom and mercy, one who delays judgement and calls his followers to do likewise - these are to be our hallmarks.

Perhaps it wasn't so much that the meaning wasn't clear to the disciples, but that they couldn't quite believe what was meant, perhaps they were shocked by the implication and asking about the meaning was more in an incredulous tone – more 'is that really what you meant?'

The shock is that the plants growing can't be told apart – they look identical until harvest time. There is no 'other' – we all look the same, we cannot therefore judge who is and isn't in the Kingdom, nor is it our role to do so, or to try and separate.

Unlike the disciples' expectation, Jesus makes it plain that the kingdom of God wouldn't be a restored Israel – separated as it had been from the other Kingdoms of the world. Instead, it would be a

borderless kingdom where the citizens might not immediately appear much different than those in the kingdom of man. Any attempt to separate the two could do damage to God's people.

Jews, and indeed all of us, love to separate, in our minds to judge others and place ourselves in our minds in a category that is better than. We try to justify ourselves and our behaviours and actions. We like to compare, and we focus on the smallest of faults in another to convince ourselves that maybe we're better than they are. I don't know how many of us struggle with this – I could joke here that I don't struggle with this – it comes all too easily for me. It is so easy to do – we do it without thinking, we make snap judgements and profile people based on a first impression – what people look like, how they sound, lifestyles and decisions they make. It is one of those things I find myself doing all the time – and really don't like, yet it seems so hard to not do. And once first impressions are made it is hard to overcome these.

There seems to be a human tendency to gather with 'like' others and create little ghettos. By gathering with others who are like us, we automatically create division and otherness. Yet this was clearly not how Jesus lived. He was the most 'other' person to have ever lived – perfect, faultless in character and deed, yet he didn't hang around with the well to dos – he hung around with sinners, drunkards, tax collectors, the despised and lowly. He chose the uneducated and ill equipped and turned the understanding of who was 'chosen' on its head. He looked beyond the outside, beyond where we find our first impressions to who they were – children of God, created in the image of the father. Loved and valued. Broken and hurting and dirty maybe, but with potential for restoration and grace and beauty.

Jesus reveals that the Kingdom of God is broad and welcoming and unexpected. The blessings of heaven, the sun and the rain fall on the just and unjust alike – even the Old Testament recognises this. Yet, this parable does also reveal that there is a real spiritual conflict between good and evil. It is important to note that while this is real, and while the lies and deception of the enemy still impact lives, this is not a battle of equals, this is not a battle that is yet to be decided. Jesus has already won the victory – sin, sickness and death have been fully and unequivocally defeated at the cross. The enemy only has as much power as we give him when we agree with him. No more. All power and authority belong to Jesus – he has taken back the keys – and he has given us this authority and power, and the keys themselves – so if all of this is Jesus' and he has given it to us, the enemy has none, except that which we allow. Our work then is solely to believe in Jesus, and the truth he sows, not what the enemy sows.

John 6:29 Jesus told them, "This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent."

The other reality is that this conflict, this battle of belief will one day have an end – there will be a final harvest moment when weeds and wheat alike are pulled up. At this stage those that bow will be saved. This should instil in us an urgency to share the good news we carry.

The good news is for all – the Kingdom is inclusive, no one is outside of grace, no one is beyond forgiveness, Christ died for all. His forgiveness covers all sin and shame. However, there is a choice for all as to who we believe, and whether we will bow before the King or not. The seeds of Bearded darnel are poisonous, the lies of the enemy are poisonous – he has come to steal, kill and destroy. When the Kingdom comes in fullness and this earth is clothed with heaven and eternity there is no place for this seed. No lies or poison can be allowed to remain, to taint and harm and damage.

While the parable talks about an ultimate harvest where the wheat and tares are separated, we cannot extrapolate this parable to say that those who are tares will remain tares – this is not a parable about the individual or about salvation (save to say that there is salvation and there are those who are not yet saved).

If we were to do that then we'd get into a Calvinist approach where all was predetermined – everyone is already of a particular seed type and this cannot be changed.

This is not how it is with God. As Christians we are new creations – something I am currently having a fresh revelation of at the moment – not that I didn't know this, but it has become life to me afresh

recently – we are not just wiped clean, start again creations, not the same as before. There are two words for new in Greek – Neos which you would use for a statement like ‘I’ve got a new car.’ It is new, but is still a car, will still function the same way, will still have the same issues, still need topping up with fuel, will still have tyres that wear out. The other word is Kainos – which would be used like ‘wow, that’s new’ - I’ve never seen that before – that’s novel. This is the word used to describe us as new creations. We don’t just have our sins wiped out and then are given a second chance in the same form we have lived previously. We are completely made new – we are united with Christ, whole new beings of different substance. This is the transformation offered by Jesus – this is the good news.

The thing to take from this parable, along with what it describes of the Kingdom is that there is a harvest to come, there is a day coming when it will be too late for some. This parable and various others talk of this reality. However, it is not a fait accompli – there is time – the owner of the field has instructed none to be pulled up until harvest, and we get to partner with Jesus in sowing good seed, the truth, the good news, we get to turn what the enemy has sought for disaster into something good. We have a role in bringing redemption and salvation and furthering this wonderful Kingdom.

So, for those growing from the seed of the enemy in this parable, it isn’t the end of the story. There is hope – and we carry it! We carry the seeds of the Kingdom and are invited to join Jesus in sowing them. Watering them. Nurturing them.

This passage serves to wake us up to the reality and urgency of the need for us to play our parts – how will they know unless someone tells them?

Romans 10:13-17 (NLT)

¹³ ...“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

¹⁴ But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?...

¹⁷ ...So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.

This is yet another reason for us to not be separate, but instead immersed. Literally in the world but not of it. Alan Scott says “God separates us from our cities, not from our cities. We are set apart to bring life to our cities.”

This feels like part of the journey we are on as a church. A vital next step in outworking the things we’ve felt God saying to us over years – Dirty Glory – getting our hands dirty and finding God at work in the midst of a broken world, - Scattered servants – bringing God and his Kingdom into our communities – everyone, everywhere every day. We are not a holy huddle, separated in cosy, homogenous church gatherings, but new creations, immersed in creation to bring transformation, the body of Christ within community, bringing life, Kingdom carriers establishing the Kingdom in the world.

So, Jesus, we pray you would help us to live lives that bear the hallmarks of you as our King, hallmarks of your Kingdom – help us not strive in self-effort, and to know that our only work is to believe in you and not in the lies sown by the enemy. As we do this, may we begin to reflect the reality of the Kingdom, reflecting the character of the King as we will live out our lives as new creations - set apart, but not separated. May we live without judgement of others, welcoming and accepting them, demonstrating wisdom and mercy and sharing the good news in order that when the harvest comes, we might see others join with us as we bow before you, our King. Amen

Questions:

Are there areas in our lives where we have tried to keep ourselves separate? Does God want to challenge us in any areas in order that we may reach others and see them encounter the truth that will set them free?

How does this parable impact our sense of urgency to share the gospel so that people have opportunity to encounter God, knowing a day is coming when it will be too late?

Are there particular individuals or people groups that God is bringing to mind and laying on our hearts to pray for or calling us to reach out to? What does this look like practically?

Pray for people in our circles who need God's salvation and ask for opportunities to share our stories with them.